



President Orders Disaster Aid For California Fires

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Washington, DC - The head of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) announced today that President Bush has declared a major disaster for California, opening the way for the use of federal disaster funds for people besieged by wildfires that have been raging since last week in the southern part of the state.

Michael D. Brown, FEMA Director and Under Secretary for Emergency Preparedness and Response at Homeland Security, said the President authorized the aid immediately after receiving FEMA's analysis of the state's request for federal relief. The declaration covers damage to private property from the fires that erupted on October 21.

"President Bush acted quickly because he recognizes the destruction being caused by these fires and the continuing threat they pose to life and property," Brown said. "The Department of Homeland Security and FEMA will do all we can to help affected families and businesses recover from their losses as we continue to support the state's firefighting efforts."

After the declaration, Brown designated the counties of Los Angeles, San Bernardino, San Diego and Ventura eligible for aid to stricken residents that can include grants to help pay for temporary housing, home repairs and other serious disaster-related expenses. Low-interest loans from the U.S. Small Business Administration also will be available to cover residential and business losses not fully compensated by insurance.

In addition, Brown said federal funds will be provided for the state and affected local governments in the four designated counties to pay 75 percent of the eligible cost for debris removal and emergency protective measures that were undertaken in response to the fires. The declaration also makes cost-shared funding available to the state for approved projects that reduce future disaster risks.

Brown indicated that more counties and additional forms of assistance for state and local government agencies may be designated later as conditions permit damage to be assessed in the affected area.

Besides today's aid, Brown noted that in the last four days FEMA had authorized seven fire management assistance grants to supplement the state's costs for fighting fires in the four designated counties. The authorizations were in addition to seven others that were previously made for wildfires that broke out in the state earlier this year.

William L. Carwile, III of FEMA was named by Brown to coordinate the federal relief effort. Carwile said affected residents and business owners in the designated counties can begin the disaster application process by calling **1-800-621-FEMA (3362), or 1-800-462-7585 (TTY) for the hearing and speech impaired**. The toll-free telephone numbers will be available **starting Tuesday, October 28**, from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. seven days a week until further notice.

On March 1, 2003, FEMA became part of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. FEMA's continuing mission within the new department is to lead the effort to prepare the nation for all hazards and effectively manage federal response and recovery efforts following any national incident. FEMA also initiates proactive mitigation activities, trains first responders, and manages Citizens Corps, the National Flood Insurance Program and the U.S. Fire Administration.

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